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Child Protection Statistics: A UK Comparison

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Introduction

The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Centre for UK-wide Learning in Child Protection (CLiCP) is a research centre based within the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. It conducts research and provides analysis and commentary on child protection policy across the UK: in each jurisdiction and UK-wide.

A major focus of CLiCP's work involves the tracking and analysis of the content and direction of child protection policy and developments across the UK. We intend to build incrementally towards a general overview of child protection in the UK over a two year period (2008 – 2010) by producing a series of papers, each based on analysis of a key aspect of child protection.

This paper provides comparative information on child protection statistics in each area of the UK. It updates CLiCP's briefing paper 'Child protection statistics: a UK comparison' which was published in June 2008. It outlines the data published in relation to the various stages of the child protection process - referral, investigation and assessment, case conference, case management and review. Where data are comparable similarities and differences between the four areas of the UK are highlighted.

Overview

Table 1 lists the main child protection statistical publications in each area of the UK. These publications are the main source of evidence for this paper.

Table 1: Child protection statistics

Area of UK	Statistical publications
England	Referrals, Assessments and Children and Young People Who Are the Subject of a Child Protection Plan, England, year Ending 31 March 2009
Wales	Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children, 2008-09 Local Authority Child Protection Registers Wales 2009
Scotland	Child Protection Statistics 2008/09
Northern Ireland	Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2008/09

In England, the Department for Children, Schools and Families collect aggregate data on children in all 150 local authorities. The most up to date statistical publication is '*Referrals, Assessments and Children and Young people who are the Subject of a Child Protection Plan, England*', published on 17 September 2009. This is the last year that the DCSF will collect these statistics. Figures for the year ending 31 March 2009 onwards will be collected in the Children in Need Census.

All 32 local authorities in Scotland submit an annual survey form providing aggregate data for children going through the process of child protection to the Scottish Government. The most recent publication is '*Child Protection Statistics 2008-9*' published on 30 September 2009.

The Department of Health, Social Services and



Public Safety Community Information Branch publish child protection statistics for the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The most recent publication is the '*Children Order Statistical Tables for Northern Ireland 2008/09*' published in April 2010.

'*Referrals, Assessments and Social Services for Children, 2008-09*', published by the Welsh Assembly Government on 23 September 2009, was the first release of statistics on referrals, assessments and social services provided to children in Wales by the 22 Welsh local authorities. The Local Government Data Unit publish figures about children on child protection registers in Wales. The most recent publication is '*Local Authority Child Protection Registers Wales 2009*'.

Child protection data

The four publications outlined above provide data at a national level. Some of them also provide data at local authority level. The Northern Ireland, English and Scottish publications also provide links to statistics for other parts of the UK.

Referral data

Referral is the first stage of the child protection process in all four areas of the UK. Referral statistics are useful because they provide information about the number of children for whom there are concerns. They are also useful in that the number of referrals can be compared with the number of child protection investigations, case conferences and registrations in order to see what proportion of initial concerns proceed further. A referral is, however, defined differently in different parts of the UK. Scotland produces data on the number of child protection referrals over the year but in England and Wales a referral is defined as a request for services to be provided by the social services department in respect of a case where the child is not previously known to the council, or where the case was previously open but is now closed, so does not only include referrals for child protection concerns. Northern Ireland usefully publish data on the number of referrals to social services and the number of child protection referrals. Table 2 outlines the number of referrals in each area of the UK but due to the different definitions of a 'referral' data is not comparable across the UK.

The Scottish statistical publication disaggregates child protection referral data by gender and age and the Northern Ireland publication disaggregates children referred to social services by gender and age. In the year ending 31 March 2009 half of child protection referrals in Scotland related to boys, 47% to girls (in a small proportion of cases gender was not known because the child was not yet born). Almost a third of referrals related to under-5s, a third to 5-10 year olds and just over a third to children and young people of 11 and over. In Northern Ireland 52% of children referred to social services in the year ending 31 March 2009 were boys; 48% were girls. Thirty per cent of referrals were of children under 5, 30% for 5-11 year olds, a quarter for 12-15 year olds and 11% for young people aged 16 and over. In 2008-09 there was a 19% increase in the number of children referred in the age band 0-4 and a 9% increase in the number of referrals for 5 to 11 year olds compared to the previous year. Northern Ireland also breakdown the number of referrals to social services by whether or not children have a visual disability, hearing disability, physical disability, learning disability or mental health issue and by religion and ethnicity. 967 children who were referred in 2008-09 had some form of disability (4% of all children referred).

Child protection referrals in Northern Ireland are broken down by the source of the referral: 41% of referrals in 2008-09 were from within social services, 12% from schools, 12% from the police, 9% from health, 7% from relatives (the remainder of referrals were from voluntary organisations, neighbours/friends, were self or anonymous referrals or came from another source).

England and Wales report the proportion of referrals that are repeat referrals within 12 months of the previous referral: in England 23% of referrals were repeat referrals within 12 months of the previous referral in the year ending 31 March 2009, in Wales 27%.

In Wales referrals are broken down according to whether they were allocated to a social worker (44%), allocated to someone other than a social worker (14%) or did not proceed to allocation (42%).

Table 2: Number of referrals

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Number of referrals in year ending 31 March 2009	547,000 requests for services to be provided	46,200 requests for services to be provided	12,713 child protection referrals	28,440 referrals to children's social services 3,825 child protection referrals

Referral data is available for 2003-2009 in England, 2006-09 in Wales, 2002-2009 in Scotland and 2007-2009 in Northern Ireland. A change in the way that referrals were counted in Scotland means, however, that comparisons pre and post 2005-2006 should be treated with caution. Since 2005-2006 Scottish local authorities have been asked to count the number of children who have a referral rather than the number of referrals - acknowledging that children may have several referrals over the course of a year and that single referrals may involve more than one child. This change in the way referrals are counted may have had an impact on the number of case conferences and number of registrations as well as the number of referrals. In England the number of referrals fluctuated between 538,500 and 569,300 over the last five years. In Wales the number of referrals increased by six per cent between 2007-2008 and 2008-09. In Scotland the number of referrals has gradually increased each year since 2005-06. In Northern Ireland the number of child protection referrals increased by a quarter between 2007-08 and 2008-09.

Data relating to investigation and assessment

Initial assessment and core assessment are key stages in the child protection process in England and Wales. Both areas publish data on the number of initial and core assessments undertaken over the year (see Table 3). An initial assessment is defined in England and Wales as a brief assessment of any child who has been referred to social services with a request that services be provided. In England a core assessment is defined as an in-depth assessment which addresses the central or most important aspects of the child's needs; there are several junctures at which a core assessment may

start, depending on the child's circumstances, and the existence of child protection concerns is not a prerequisite.

In England, data is available for 2003-2009, in Wales for 2006-2009 only. In England the number of initial and core assessments has increased gradually since 2003; numbers have also increased in Wales. Inter-agency guidance for England and Wales states that initial assessments should be completed within seven working days and core assessments within 35 working days. These are performance indicators within the performance assessment framework and the statistical publications for both areas provide data on the percentage of assessments which meet these targets. In England, 72% of initial assessments were completed within seven working days in the year ending 31 March 2009, and in Wales 70% (a slight increase in both cases). In England initial assessments completed, as a percentage of all referrals, increased from 59% in 2008 to 64% in 2009. A higher proportion of referrals are, therefore, progressing to the assessment stage. In Wales statistics are also published on who saw the child in the assessment process.

78% of core assessments were completed within 35 working days in England in the year ending 31 March 2009 (a reduction from 80% in 2008), and 60% in Wales (an increase from 55% in 2008).

Table 3: Numbers of initial assessments and core assessments completed

	England	Wales
Initial assessments completed in year ending 31 March 2009	349,000	24,200
Core assessments completed in year ending 31 March 2009	120,600	7,156

The Scottish publication does not include data on investigation or assessment. The Northern Ireland document includes data on what happens to referrals to children's social services: 80% of children referred to social services in the year 2008/09 were allocated for further action (service or assessment). This was an increase of just over a fifth compared to figures for 2007-08, and there was a drop of 41% in the number of

children referred where no action was required. There was, however, a significant increase in the number of children referred for whom no action was possible due to unmet need from 58 in 2007-08 to 580 in 2008-09. The Northern Ireland document also provides data on the number of child protection investigations completed over the year. This data is disaggregated according to whether the investigation was undertaken by joint protocol, by social workers or by the police. The number of child protection investigations increased by almost a quarter between 2007-08 and 2008-09.

Data on emergency protection procedures

None of the four publications includes data on the number of children subject to emergency procedures.

Case conference data

The statistical publications for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland provide data on the number of initial case conferences over the year (see table 4).

Table 4: Number of initial case conferences

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Conferences in year ending 31 March 2009	N/A	2,718	4,720	2,159

Scottish data is available for 2000-2009, Northern Ireland and Wales for 2007-2009 only. The number of initial case conferences in Scotland increased by 10% between 2008 and 2009 with only a 3% increase in the number of referrals over the same period. A higher proportion of referrals are, therefore, resulting in a case conference – 37% of all referrals in 2008-9. In Northern Ireland there was an even larger increase of more than a fifth, in the number of case conferences between 2008 and 2009, but in comparison with Scotland the number of child protection referrals increased at an even greater rate, by a quarter. The Scottish publication also provides data on the number of case conferences by placement of the child prior to referral and by known/suspected abuser. Seventy nine per cent of children were living at home prior to referral in 2008-09. For 85% of chil-

dren the primary known/suspected abuser was the child's natural mother or father. Northern Ireland and Scotland also publish data on the outcome of case conferences. In Northern Ireland 84% of children who were subject to an initial case conference in the year ending 31 March 2009 became registered compared to 77% in Scotland.

Registration data

All four areas of the UK publish data on registration. In England and Wales children and young people are registered if they are the subject of a child protection plan, in Northern Ireland and Scotland if they are on the child protection register. All four areas publish data on the number of registrations over the year ending 31 March as well as on the number of children registered as at 31 March. This data is also disaggregated by gender in all four countries. Table 5 illustrates the number of registrations as at 31 March 2009 by gender.

Table 5: Number of registrations, by gender

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Total registrations as at 31 March 2009	34,100	2,512	2,682	2,488
Boys as % of total	51%	50%	51%	50%
Girls as % of total	49%	49%	48%	50%

English registration data is available for 1997-2009, Scottish data for 2000-2009, Northern Ireland data for 2002-2009 and Welsh data for 1993-2009. Table 6 below illustrates the number of registrations over the period 2002 to 2009. In all four areas the number of registrations has increased since 2002, with particularly large increases between 2008 and 2009.

Table 6: Number of registrations over period 2002-2009

Registrations as at 31 March	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
2002	25,700	1,970	2,018	1,531
2003	26,600	2,235	2,289	1,608
2004	26,300	2,155	2,245	1,417
2005	25,900	2,270	2,157	1,593
2006	26,400	2,165	2,288	1,639
2007	27,900	2,295	2,593	1,805
2008	29,200	2,320	2,433	2,071
2009	34,100	2,510	2,683	2,488

The Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales publications disaggregate the number of registrations by age as well as gender but the age groups are not directly comparable: in Scotland data is broken down into unborn children, children aged 0 to 4, 5 to 10, 11 to 15 and 16 and over; in Northern Ireland under 1, 1-4, 5-11, 12-15 and 16 and over and Wales under 1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-15 and 16-18. Data can, therefore, only be compared for under 5's, 5-15's and 16-18 year olds (see Table 6). The table shows that children and young people on the child protection register tend to be somewhat older in Northern Ireland than in Wales and Scotland: less than a third of children are under five in Northern Ireland compared to over half in Scotland. A significantly higher proportion of children on the register in Northern Ireland are 16 and over. Children in Northern Ireland also tend, however, to stay on the child protection register somewhat longer than children in the other areas of the UK and it is possible that a high proportion of the young people aged 16 and over who were on the register at 31 March 2009 had been on the register since before they were 16. Indeed the Northern Ireland publication also breaks down the number of children who were registered in the year ending 31 March 2009 by age - and this shows that just 4% of young people who became registered over the year were 16 and over.

Table 7: Registered children by age

Registered children by age 31 March 2009	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Under 5's	N/A	44%	51%	31%
5-15	N/A	53%	49%	62%
16 and over	N/A	3%	0%	7%

All four publications provide data on re-registrations (see table 8). Between 12 and 17% of registrations had previously been registered across the UK; Wales had a slightly higher percentage of re-registrations than England, Scotland or Northern Ireland; there has been a significant fall in the percentage of re-registrations in Northern Ireland since 2007.

Table 8: Re-registrations

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Percentage of registrations previously registered in year ending 31 March 2009	13	17	14	12

The publications for England and Wales provide the rate of registrations per 10,000 population under 18 at 31 March 2009 - 40 per 10,000 in Wales and 31 per 10,000 population in England. The rate has increased considerably in both areas since 2007. Scotland report the rate per 1,000 population aged 0 to 15: 2.9 per 1,000 population aged 0 to 15 were registered at 31 March 2009. In comparison to England and Wales the rate has increased only slightly in Scotland since 2007. In all three areas the figures has increased since 2008. 2009 figures are not yet available for Northern Ireland, but for the year ending 31 March 2008, Northern Ireland had a higher number, 48 children on the child protection register per 10,000-population aged under 18, than Wales (36.4), England 2 (26.6), and Scotland (23.3).

Table 9: Registrations by category of abuse 2008-09

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Neglect	45%	48%	47%	28%
Physical abuse	15%	20%	21%	25%
Emotional abuse	25%	24%	25%	13%
Sexual abuse	6%	9%	7%	10%
Mixed/multiple	9%	-	-	24%

All four areas provide statistics on registration by category of abuse (see table 9 for 2009 figures). In all four areas the highest proportion of registrations are for neglect but Northern Ireland has a lower proportion than the other areas because they have a far higher number of 'mixed' registrations (registrations for more than one category of abuse) and mixed registrations frequently include neglect with one or more other forms of abuse. If the number of mixed registrations including neglect are added to the number of registrations for neglect alone then the proportion is 50% which is comparable to the other parts of the UK. Northern Ireland also has a lower proportion of registrations for emotional abuse and a higher proportion for physical abuse than the other three areas.

England and Northern Ireland provide data on category of abuse for 2003-2009, Scotland for 2000-2009, Wales for 1993-2009. In England, Wales and Scotland there has been an increase in the proportion of registrations for neglect and emotional abuse over the period and a decrease in the number of registrations for physical abuse and sexual abuse. The proportion of registrations for emotional abuse increased quite substantially in Wales and Scotland between 2006-07 and 2008-09. Northern Ireland is somewhat different because of the high proportion of mixed registrations.

All four publications report on the number of de-registrations over the year - in England and Wales the number of children whose child protection plans were discontinued, in Scotland and Northern Ireland the number who were

removed from the child protection register (see table 10).

Table 10: De-registrations

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Number of de-registrations year ending 31 March 2009	32,800	2,900	3,499	1,401

England, Scotland and Northern Ireland also disaggregate the number of de-registrations by length of time on the register, Wales do not (see Table 11). The figures for England and Scotland are fairly similar but children in Northern Ireland spend longer on the child protection register before they are deregistered. More than half – 51% of those deregistered in the year ending 31 March 2009 had been on the register for over a year compared to a third in England and just under a quarter in Scotland.

Table 11: De-registration by length of time on register

De-registrations year ending 2008-09 by length of time on register	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
Less than 6 months	31%	N/A	43%	20%
6 months to under 1 year	37%	N/A	34%	29%
1 to 2 years	27%	N/A	19%	34%
2 years or more	6%	N/A	5%	17%

Data on de-registrations are available for 1997-2009 for England, 2000-2009 for Scotland, 2006-09 for Wales and Northern Ireland. Numbers have increased across the UK in line with increased numbers of registrations.

Case review data

The performance assessment framework in England and Wales includes a performance indicator for review of child protection cases. The statistical returns, therefore, include data on the proportion of cases which should have

been reviewed over the year which were reviewed – 99% in England, 97% in Wales. In England data is available for 2004-2009, in Wales for 2006-09 only. Scotland and Northern Ireland do not produce data on case review.

Conclusions

There is a limit to how far child protection statistics can be compared across the UK because different statistics are collected in different areas. Sometimes this is a reflection of different child protection processes, for example, only England and Wales publish statistics on initial and core assessments because these processes are unique to them. Even where processes are the same or similar, however, different statistics may be collected and published. For example, the age categories used are not always directly comparable or statistics may be available for different years and comparison for more than one year may not be possible. In Scotland, referral data refers to child protection referrals; in England and Wales referrals include non child protection concerns; in Northern Ireland both referrals to social services and child protection referrals are recorded.

The only stage of the process which all areas of the UK collect and publish statistics on and for which reliable comparisons can be made is in relation to registration. There are some similarities in registration data across the UK, for example, there has been a significant increase in the number of registrations in all four areas of the UK since 2002 and neglect is the most common category for registration in all areas. There are some differences between Northern Ireland and the other three areas – the average age of children on the register is older in Northern Ireland than in the other three areas of the UK; children stay on the register for longer; and children are more likely to be registered under more than one category of abuse and more likely to be registered for physical abuse.

Currently, it is difficult to undertake meaningful UK analysis of child protection statistics, largely

because of the lack of uniformity of available data. Some areas of the UK collect and publish useful data which is not published elsewhere. To make UK comparative analysis of child protection statistics more meaningful it would be useful if the four parts of the UK further aligned their data collection and publication processes.